

# First in AMERICA

*Connecticut shows off its spirit of innovation.*

By Valerie A. Russo

Connecticut is nicknamed the Constitution State because the first written constitution in America, The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut Colony, was adopted in Hartford in 1639.

Over the years, the spirit of innovation has remained strong, resulting in numerous ‘firsts,’ such as the nation’s first public art museum, first Audubon bird sanctuary, first municipal rose garden and more.

Below are some of Connecticut firsts, which are commemorated with exhibits, tours and other programs for visitors.

## 1 Litchfield Law School: First post-graduate professional school, Litchfield, (1784).

After the American Revolution, law apprenticeships gave way to formal, organized instruction, starting in 1784 with attorney Tapping Reeve’s one-room law school, which launched the careers of two United States vice presidents, three U.S. Supreme Court justices, 14 governors, 129 U.S. congressmen and other influential Americans. Open mid-April through November, the Tapping Reeve House and Law School in Litchfield now is a museum offering unique tours: Each visitor chooses a card containing historical information about an actual law student and then views exhibits pertaining to that student.

## 2 Old State House: First building erected for state government, Hartford, (1796 to 1797).

At the end of the Revolutionary War, Hartford’s meeting-house was damaged by celebratory fireworks. A new building was erected on the site beginning in 1796, making it the first state government building in the United States. Designed by Charles Bulfinch, attractions include tours of the restored chambers and courtroom, exhibits on Connecticut history and a re-creation of the museum that occupied the building in 1798. Today, the Old State House is regarded as one of the oldest remaining state houses in the nation.



Yale University Art Gallery.

## 3 Yale University Art Gallery: First college art museum, New Haven, (1832).

Yale University Art Gallery was founded in 1832, when the artist John Trumbull donated more than 100 of his portraits and historical paintings and designed a fireproof building to display them. Today, the museum’s many collections are housed in a 1953 building made of brick, concrete, glass and steel – the first significant commission for architect Louis Kahn. Free admission and free gallery talks are offered.

## 4 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: First public art museum, Hartford, (1842).

In the early to mid-19th century, artists traveled west to



Wadsworth Atheneum.



Old State House.



Barnum Museum.



New Britain Museum of American Art.



Elizabeth Park.



Tapping Reeve House & Law School.

capture on canvas the natural beauty of the American wilderness. In 1842, philanthropist Daniel Wadsworth built a museum in Hartford where the public could see American landscape paintings and other works from his private collection. Today, American landscapes by Hudson River School artists are in the Huntington Gallery, off the lobby of the Neo-Gothic building designed by Wadsworth.

## 5 The Barnum and London: First three-ring circus, Bridgeport, (1881).

In 1881, Bethel native Phinneas T. Barnum and his partners introduced the three-ring circus to audiences throughout the United States and Europe. Winter quarters were in

Bridgeport. 2010 marks the 200th anniversary of P.T. Barnum’s birth, an appropriate time to visit the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, which was designed by Barnum and opened to the public in 1893.

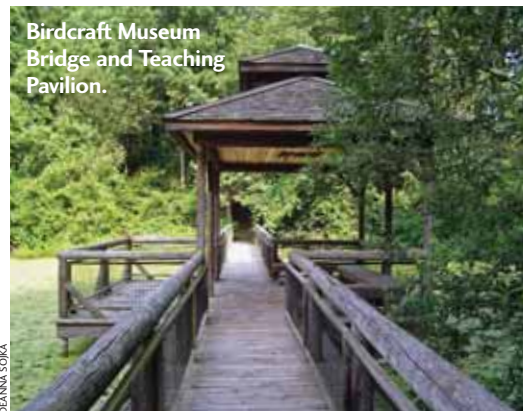
## 6 New Britain Museum of American Art: First museum to collect and exhibit solely American art, New Britain, (1903).

In 1903, industrialist John Butler Talcott gave the New Britain Institute \$20,000 to purchase modern oil paintings. The museum proceeded to build a collection of the nation’s finest art – colonial portraits, Hudson River School landscapes, American Impressionism, genre scenes from the Ash Can School – and changed its name to reflect the American focus. Today, the museum also has the nation’s first museum-based collection of American illustration from the 19th century to the present. Visitor programs include American Masterpieces tours on Sunday afternoons, art and live jazz on first Fridays and artist gallery talks on second Thursdays.

## 7 Elizabeth Park Rose Garden: First municipal rose garden, Hartford, (1904).

Elizabeth Park, a 102-acre horticultural park on the Hartford/West Hartford border, contains the first municipal rose garden in the United States, which opened to the public with 1,000 rose bushes. Today, the 2-1/2 acre rose garden has 15,000 rose bushes, including unnamed test roses for





Birdcraft Museum Bridge and Teaching Pavilion.

DEANNA SOKA



Weir Studio.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEIR FARM NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

the American Rose Society and named roses, such as the fragrant white Pope John Paul II rose. Don't miss the free rose garden tours in June or the annual Rose Weekend Festival, June 18 to 20.

## 8 Birdcraft Sanctuary: First bird sanctuary owned and run by a State Audubon Society, Fairfield, (1914).

In 1914, Annie Burr Jennings gave land in Fairfield to Connecticut Audubon Society founder Mabel Osgood Wright for the purpose of creating a bird sanctuary. Now, the six-acre site is home to the Connecticut Audubon Society's Birdcraft Museum, which contains dioramas of mounted preserved animals in their Connecticut habitats, and the adjacent bird sanctuary, where more than 120 species of birds have been documented. Come for the spring and fall bird banding demonstrations.



Submarine #3 missile silo hatch.

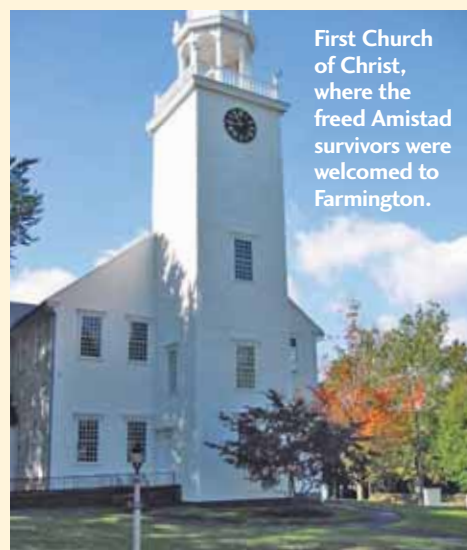
LAUREN VINCENT SCHWANN

## 9 USS Nautilus: World's first nuclear submarine, Groton, (1954).

The world's first submarine, the USS Nautilus, was launched in 1954 on the Thames River. Four years later, it became the first ship to cross the North Pole. Today, this decommissioned Navy submarine is a National Historic Landmark and the centerpiece of the U.S. Navy's Submarine Force Library and Museum. Take a self-guided audio tour of the Nautilus and see the full-size replica of Bushnell's Turtle, the first submarine to attack an enemy ship, on display in the museum. The one-man, hand crank-powered Turtle was designed and built by David Bushnell of Old Saybrook to attack British warships during the Revolutionary War.

## 10 Weir Farm: First and only National Park System site dedicated to American painting, Wilton, (1990).

Weir Farm was home to three generations of artists – Impressionist painter Julian Alden Weir, who purchased the farm in 1882; Weir's daughter, painter Dorothy Weir Young, and her husband, sculptor Mahonri Young; and the last private owners, painters Sperry and Doris Andrews. Visitors to this 60-acre park are welcome to sketch, paint, photograph, hike, see exhibits in the Visitor Center and join guided walks to learn about the artists, and the geology and agricultural history of the area. ■



First Church of Christ, where the freed Amistad survivors were welcomed to Farmington.

KENNETH LOUREK

## The Amistad Trail

The first civil rights case to come before the U.S. Supreme Court began in Connecticut. The Amistad case involved a group of West Africans who were abducted from their homeland. They were transported by slave ship to Cuba, where they were sold at auction and put on board the schooner Amistad, bound for a life of slavery. They mutinied and ordered the crew to return to Africa, but ended up in New London.

The Amistad Trail group traces its United States journeys, from New London in 1839 to its departure from Farmington in 1841. The trail is a part of the Connecticut Freedom Trail, a list of more than 60 historic locations that played

an important role in the African-American journey from slavery to freedom in Connecticut.

Sites include the New Haven Colony Historical Society Museum (artwork and artifacts); Amistad Memorial (site of the New Haven jail where the Africans were held); Old State House (site of the first Amistad trial); Connecticut Historical Society (multimedia Amistad exhibit); and Amistad sites in Farmington, where the Africans were housed and educated while funds were being raised to send them home (walking tours by appointment with the Farmington Historical Society).

For more information, visit [www.visitconnecticut.com/amistad.htm](http://www.visitconnecticut.com/amistad.htm).